

San Diego County Beach Closures and Advisories in 2001

Summary and Comparison to Previous Years

In 2001, San Diego County experienced 1360 beach closure and advisory days as a result of reported water contamination events¹. In addition to the 1360 beach closure and advisory days, the county as a whole also experienced 49 days when all coastal waters were under a General Advisory due to urban runoff impacting beaches after rainfall.

Yearly totals for water contamination events and days posted in 2001 dropped from the previous year. Although 2001 was the second full year that local health agencies used the new regulations in the Beach Safety Bill (AB 411), comparisons to 1999 and 2000 in numbers of Advisories due to bacterial exceedances in monitoring are not possible due to changes in monitoring frequency and protocol. These changes consisted of a reduction in shoreline monitoring during the non- AB411 season (November 1 – March 31) and a change in sampling protocol by the County of San Diego Department of Environmental Health (DEH). The DEH typically collects 57 of 100 weekly shoreline samples from San Onofre State Beach to Imperial Beach between April 1 and October 31. As part of an effort to attain consistency with other monitoring programs in Southern California, and based upon recommendations from the State Beach Water Quality Workgroup, routine sample collection was moved to 25 yards downcoast from the 'mixing zone' where runoff flows enters ocean or bay waters. As part of this change in sampling protocol, permanent metal health risk warning signs were placed at coastal outlets with dry weather flows. Unrelated to the changes in monitoring frequency and protocol, the number of sewage spills causing beach closures increased slightly from 2000.

Beach Closures

A "closure" is the placement of signs at a public beach that informs the public that the area is closed to swimming and/or water contact due to water contamination. Orange or yellow warning signs reading "*Contaminated Water - Keep Out*" indicate a beach closure. A beach closure is a consequence of a reported sewage spill that impacts, or may impact, water quality at a recreational beach. Sewage contaminated water poses the greatest health risk to ocean users.

Beach Advisories / Warnings

An advisory or warning is the placement of signs at a public beach that warns the public against swimming and/or water contact due to the risk of possible illness. White warning signs reading "*Warning - Contact With This Water May Cause Illness. Bacteria Levels Exceed Health Standards*" indicate an advisory/ warning. An advisory/ warning is a consequence of bacteria levels in monitoring results exceeding State standards. The source of the bacteria is usually unknown, but may include domestic pet, wildlife, bird, or human feces, soils, or decaying plant matter. Another situation in which a beach is under advisory is during the excavation of a river mouth or lagoon opening when potentially contaminated water is released into the ocean.

General Advisory

The DEH issues a 72 hour General Advisory for all coastal waters due to ocean and bay water contamination by urban runoff after 0.2 inches or more of rain. A General Advisory is listed on the County web page (www.sdcdeh.org "Beach & Bay Status Report"), phone message (619.338.2073), and in the San Diego Union Tribune weather page. When rainfall washes pollutants off streets and urban areas, urban runoff is carried to beaches via storm drain, river, and lagoon outlets where it contaminates ocean waters. Swimming near these outlets has been correlated to an increased risk of illness among ocean users.

¹ The 1360 closure and advisory days total does not include beaches posted under chronic status due to on-going sources of contamination. Beaches with Long Term Advisories included the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge and Border Field State Park, and the Children's Pool in La Jolla. Although monitoring results at these beaches was occasionally within State standards, the presence of a known source of contamination, i.e., a sewage contaminated river, and seals respectively, require these areas to be posted as a precaution.